

Ethical Dilemmas in Environmental Engineering

Read the story “Searching for Summer” by Joan Aiken

Discussion topics:

1. Summarize the story into a couple of paragraphs.

Setting is “after the bombs” presumably some kind of nuclear winter has created constant cloud coverage that keeps the skies gray and the land barren. Older people in the story refer to the times when the sky was blue and the grass was green.

2. What other kind of environmental disasters (both catastrophic and long-slow ...) could cause similar conditions?
3. What is the significance of sunshine in the story? How about in our world?

The story has three main character sets, Mr. Noakes, Mrs. Hatching and William, and Tom and Lily.

4. Who is Mr. Noakes? What are his characteristics?
5. Who are Mrs Hatching and William?
6. Who are Tom and Lily?

Searching for Summer is an Allegory. With the definition of allegory in mind () answer the following questions:

7. What component of our modern society does Mr. Noakes represent?
8. What component of our modern society do Mrs Hatching and William represent?
9. What component of modern society does Tom and Lily represent?

In the story Tom and Lily discover a place where the sun shines brilliantly, and flowers and vegetables grow in abundance, and the stars are magnificent at night.

10. What would Mr. Noakes do if he discovered this location?
11. Is Mr. Noakes plan consistent with the value/significance of sunshine in the story?
12. How about in our world?

At the end of the story the couple are approached by Mr. Noakes who notices the glow from the sun on their skin and demands to know where they have been. They choose to

mislead Mr. Noakes rather than him where they had been and consequently cannot return to the cottage for their belongings, or to say goodbye to the woman and her son.

13. Again considering the allegorical nature of the story, what does the decision to mislead represent?
14. Using the various ethical modes of reasoning discussed this seminar, is their decision to mislead Mr. Noakes defensible?
15. Are there any circumstances in civil and environmental engineering where is such a decision justified?
16. Does the engineering code of ethics provide any guidance on how to act in such a situation?
17. How about the engineer's creed?
18. Is this story relevant to environmental engineering?
19. How about the study of ethics?
20. How does the concept of noblesse oblige fit into the various modes of ethical reasoning discussed this seminar?

Searching for Summer was introduced to me by Amelia Hill, a HISD English teacher who uses the story in her classes to teach environmental awareness, appreciation, and the concept of self-sacrifice. The story and her lesson plans seemed a natural fit for engineering ethics.

allegory - A form of extended metaphor, in which objects, persons, and actions in a narrative, are equated with the meanings that lie outside the narrative itself. The underlying meaning has moral, social, religious, or political significance, and characters are often personifications of abstract ideas as charity, greed, or envy. Thus an allegory is a story with two meanings, a literal meaning and a symbolic meaning.

noblesse oblige (noh-BLES oh-BLEEZH)- The obligation of those of high rank to be honorable and generous (often used ironically). The belief that the wealthy and privileged are obliged (duty-bound) to help the less fortunate. From French, meaning “nobility obligates.” Obligation, responsibility, duty - the social force that binds you to your obligations and the courses of action demanded by that force; "we must instill a sense of duty in our children"; "every right implies a responsibility; every opportunity, an obligation; every possession, a duty"- John D.Rockefeller Jr

“An adventurer like Lemuel Struthers might build up the millions of his Shoe Polish on any number of shady dealings; but unblemished honesty was the noblesse oblige of old financial New York.” from *The Age of Innocence* by Wharton, Edith

“He found, with rare and mythical exceptions, that there was no noblesse oblige among the business and financial supermen.” *Burning Daylight* by London, Jack

Noblesse Oblige

By David R. Murray

Graduate Student, Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University

Definition

Translated from the French, *noblesse oblige* means "nobility obligates." Originally, *noblesse oblige* was used to suggest that certain requirements of behavior could be legitimately imposed upon persons of noble birth. *Noblesse oblige* in modern English parlance is a broad literary concept. It suggests that anyone who possesses special talents or gifts is required by society to make the best use of those gifts; that he or she is duty-bound to do his or her best. The concept has been extended to include corporations and even entire nations: a December 14, 1992 article in *Time* magazine about U.S. involvement in Somalia was titled, "Noblesse oblige for the sole superpower."

Historic Roots

A fairly recent term, *noblesse oblige* was first used in 1837 by F. A. Kemble who wrote in a letter, "To be sure, if 'noblesse oblige,' royalty must do so still more" (OED, p. 453).

The connection between *noblesse oblige* and royalty continues to this day. It was the title of an April 25, 1994 article in *Forbes* magazine that profiles Bostonian Martin Lobkowicz, the son of a Czech aristocrat, who fled the Czech Republic at the age of 10. With Czech democratization, Martin Lobkowicz was able to reclaim his family's estates. He now owns eight castles, artworks by Canaletto, Rubens, Velazquez, and Brueghel and 40 Spanish portraits from the 16th and 17th centuries. He possesses a library of 70,000 volumes and original musical scores, including Beethoven's original score for the Third Symphony and Mozart's opera *Don Giovanni*. And he also owns thousands of acres of forests, a brewery dating to 1466, a vineyard, a spa, and a letter from Beethoven begging the family to increase his pension. But, he says, "We are merely custodians of the cultural treasures that must be preserved for future generations" (Berman, 1994).

In this case, while Mr. Lobkowicz could sell his family's treasures and collect hundreds of millions of dollars for himself and his family, he feels obligated to maintain them for the people of the Czech Republic. Societal pressures here compel Mr. Lobkowicz to act selflessly and honorably—the very essence of

noblesse oblige.

Importance

The importance is not the definition of *noblesse oblige* itself, but an understanding of the strength and power the concept wields over many of the world's most successful business and civic leaders, as well as to gifted ordinary individuals. People who do not consider themselves noble (i.e., the beneficiaries of any special skill, talent, or benefit) may feel no external compunction to excel. Yet, if this concept is taken broadly, each can be seen as having unique skills and talents that we are obligated to make the best use of.

Ties to the Philanthropic Sector

For some donors, a sense of *noblesse oblige* the key reason underlying their philanthropic activities. Individuals who possess what they perceive as significant wealth ("significant" being different for every donor) often give money away in an effort to do the right thing. They may feel that their amount of wealth is unfair or unwarranted; they may feel guilty about their riches or selfish if they maintain their wealth for themselves. By sharing their riches (either monetary or otherwise) they may reap great joy.

Noblesse oblige also applies to areas apart from money. A particularly talented administrator or manager may feel obligated to help an organization he or she cares about if the organization is foundering. A parent who enjoys learning may volunteer to teach at his or her child's school. An attorney may provide *pro bono* services to a church. *Noblesse oblige* thus may apply to voluntarism as well as to direct gifts of cash.

Key Related Ideas

Noblesse oblige is simply one of many donor motivations for giving. It should be considered at the same time as other donor motivations, including public recognition, belief in the recipient organization's mission, acquisition of social status, mutual aid, serial reciprocity and others. *Noblesse oblige* is also related to any study of early American philanthropists. Andrew Carnegie's wealth achieved for him a kind of nobility, a nobility which then required him to give away much of his fortune because of *noblesse oblige*.

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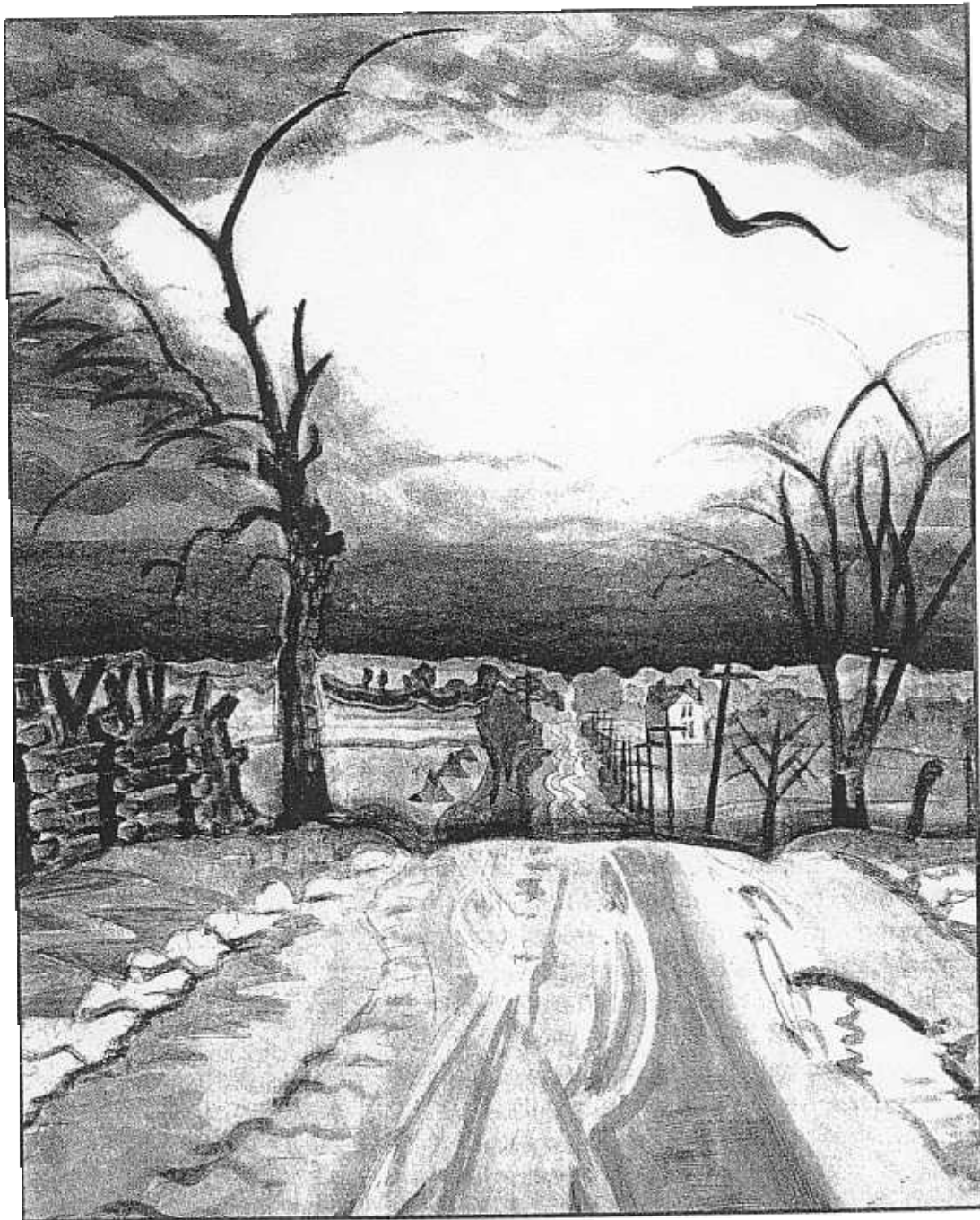
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Searching for Summer

Joan Aiken



The Mysterious Bird (1917), Charles Burchfield. Watercolor and pencil on paper, 20 3/4" x 17 1/2", Delaware Art Museum, Wilmington, bequest of John L. Sexton, 1955.

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Viewing and Representing



The Mysterious Bird by Charles Burchfield

Possible Response: The yellow foreground looks like snow. The dark, jagged lines in the foreground represent the trees. The

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Use Unit One Resource Book

or patch of sunshine to be seen anywhere in the gray, winter-ridden landscape. Lily began to get discouraged, so they stopped for a cup of tea at a drive-in.

"Seen the sun lately, mate?" Tom asked the proprietor.

He laughed shortly. "Notice any buses or trucks around here? Last time I saw the sun was two years ago September; came out just in time for the wife's birthday."

"It's stars I'd like to see," Lily said, looking wistfully at her dust-colored tea. "Ever so pretty they must be."

"Well, better be getting on I suppose," said Tom, but he had lost some of his bounce and confidence. Every place they passed through looked nastier than the last, partly on account of the dismal light, partly because people had given up bothering to take a pride in their boroughs.⁵ And then, just as they were entering a village called Molesworth, the dimmest, drabdest, most insignificant huddle of houses they had come to yet, the engine coughed and died on them.

"Can't see what's wrong," said Tom, after a prolonged and gloomy survey.

"Oh, Tom!" Lily was almost crying. "What'll we do?"

"Have to stop here for the night, s'pose." Tom was short-tempered with frustration.

"Look, there's a garage just up the road. We can push the bike there, and they'll tell us if there's a pub⁶ where we can stay. It's nearly six anyway."

They had taken the bike to the garage, and the man there was just telling them that the only pub in the village was the Rising Sun, where Mr. Noakes might be able to give them a bed, when a bus pulled up in front of the petrol⁷ pumps.

"Look," the garage owner said, "there's Mr. Noakes just getting out of the bus now. Sid!" he called.

But Mr. Noakes was not able to come to them at once. Two old people were climbing slowly out of the bus ahead of him: a blind man with a white stick, and a withered, frail old lady in a black satin dress and hat. "Careful now, George," she was saying, "mind ee be careful with my son William."

"I'm being careful, Mrs. Hatching," the conductor said patiently, as he almost lifted the unsteady old pair off the bus platform. The driver had stopped his engine, and everyone on the bus was taking a mild and sympathetic interest, except for Mr.

Noakes just behind who was cursing irritably at the delay.

When the two old people were on the narrow pavement, the conductor saw that they were going to have trouble with a bicycle that was propped against the curb just ahead of them; he picked it up and stood

holding it until they had passed the

line of petrol pumps and were going slowly off along a path across the fields. Then, grinning, he put it back, jumped hurriedly into the bus, and rang his bell.

"Old nuisances," Mr. Noakes said furiously. "Wasting public time. Every week that palaver⁸ goes on, taking the old man to Midwick Hospital Outpatients and back again. I know what I'd do with 'em. Put to sleep, that sort ought to be."

Mr. Noakes was a repulsive-looking

How could the sky

blue?

5. boroughs: towns or districts.

6. pub: a British term for a small tavern. Pubs in small towns sometimes serve meals and rent rooms to travelers.

7. petrol: a British term for gasoline.

8. palaver (pə-lāv'ər): useless chatter.

BLOCK SCHEDULING: MANAGING TIME

If your schedule requires that you If you want to take advantage of

individual, but when he heard that Tom and Lily wanted a room for the night, he changed completely and gave them a leer that was full of false goodwill. He was a big, red-faced man with wet, full lips, bulging pale-gray bloodshot eyes, and a crop of stiff greasy black hair. He wore tennis shoes.

"Honeymooners, eh?" he said, looking sentimentally at Lily's pale prettiness. "Want a bed for the night, eh?" and he laughed a disgusting laugh that sounded like thick oil coming out of a bottle, heh-heh-heh-heh, and gave Lily a tremendous pinch on her arm. Disengaging herself as politely as she could, she stooped and picked up something from the pavement. They followed Mr. Noakes glumly up the street to the Rising Sun.

While they were eating their baked beans, Mr. Noakes stood over their table grimacing at them. Lily unwisely confided to him that they were looking for a bit of sunshine. Mr. Noakes's laughter nearly shook down the ramshackle building.

"Sunshine! Oh my gawd! That's a good 'un! Hear that, Mother?" he bawled to his wife. "They're looking for a bit of sunshine. Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh! Why," he said, banging on the table till the baked beans leaped about, "if I could find a bit of sunshine near here, permanent bit that is, dja know what I'd do?"

The young people looked at him inquiringly across the bread and margarine.

"Lido,⁹ trailer site, country club, holiday camp—you wouldn't know the place. Land around here is dirt cheap; I'd buy up the lot. Nothing but woods. I'd advertise—I'd have people flocking to this little dump from all over the country. But what a hope, what a hope, eh? Well, feeling better? Enjoyed your tea? Ready for bed? Heh-heh-heh-heh, bed's ready for you."

Avoiding one another's eyes, Tom and Lily stood up.

"I—I'd like to go for a bit of a walk first, Tom," Lily said in a small voice. "Look, I picked up that old lady's bag on the pavement; I didn't notice it till we'd done talking to Mr. Noakes, and by then she was out of sight. Should we take it back to her?"

"Good idea," said Tom, pouncing on the suggestion with relief. "Do you know where she lives, Mr. Noakes?"

"Who, old Ma Hatching? Sure I know. She lives in the wood. But you don't want to go taking her bag back, not this time o' the evening you don't. Let her worry. She'll come asking for it in the morning."

"She walked so slowly," said Lily, holding the bag gently in her hands. It was very old, made of black velvet on two ring handles, and embroidered with beaded roses. "I think we ought to take it to her, don't you, Tom?"

"Oh, very well, very well, have it your own way," Mr. Noakes said, winking at Tom. "Take that path by the garage; you can't go wrong. I've never been there meself, but they live somewhere in that wood back o' the village; you'll find it soon enough."

They found the path soon enough, but not the cottage. Under the lowering¹⁰ sky they walked forward endlessly among trees that carried only tiny and rudimentary leaves, wizened and poverty-stricken.¹¹ Lily was still wearing her wedding sandals, which had begun to blister her. She held onto Tom's arm, biting her lip with the pain, and he looked down miserably at her bent brown head; everything had turned out so differently from what he had planned.

By the time they reached the cottage Lily

9. lido (li'dō): a British term for a public outdoor swimming pool.

10. lowering (lou'ər-ŭng): dark and threatening.

11. rudimentary . . . poverty-stricken: leaves that are imperfectly formed and shriveled up from lack of sunlight.

could hardly bear to put her left foot to the ground, and Tom was gentling her along: "It can't be much farther now, and they'll be sure to have a bandage. I'll tie it up, and you can have a sit-down. Maybe they'll give us a cup of tea. We could borrow an old pair of socks or something. . . ." Hardly noticing the cottage garden, beyond a vague impression of rows of runner beans, they made for the clematis-grown¹² porch and knocked. There was a brass lion's head on the door, carefully polished.

"Eh, me dear!" It was the old lady, old Mrs. Hatching, who opened the door, and her exclamation was a long-drawn gasp of pleasure and astonishment. "Eh, me dear! 'Tis the pretty bride. See'd ye s'arternoon when we was coming home from hospital."

"Who be?" shouted a voice from inside.

"Come in, come in, me dears. My son William'll be glad to hear company; he can't see, poor soul, nor has this thirty year, ah, and a pretty sight he's losing this minute—"

"We brought back your bag," Tom said, putting it in her hands, "and we wondered if you'd have a bit of plaster¹³ you could kindly let us have. My wife's hurt her foot—"

My wife. Even in the midst of Mrs. Hatching's voluble welcome the strangeness of these words struck the two young people, and they fell quiet, each of them, pondering, while Mrs. Hatching thanked and commiserated, all in a breath, and asked them to take a seat on the sofa and fetched a basin of water from the scullery,¹⁴ and William from his seat in the chimney corner demanded to know what it was all about.

"Wot be doing? Wot be doing, Mother?"

" 'Tis a bride, all in's finery," she shrilled

back at him, "an's blistered her foot, poor heart." Keeping up a running commentary for William's benefit she bound up the foot, every now and then exclaiming to herself in wonder over the fineness of Lily's wedding dress, which lay in yellow nylon swathes around the chair. "There, me dear. Now us'll have a cup of tea, eh? Proper thirsty you'm fare to be, walking all the way to here this hot day."

Hot day? Tom and Lily stared at each other and then around the room. Then it was true, it was not their imagination, that a great dusty golden square of sunshine lay on the fireplace wall, where the brass pendulum of the clock at every swing blinked into sudden brilliance? That the blazing geraniums on the windowsill housed a drove of murmuring bees? That, through the window, the gleam of linen hung in the sun to whiten suddenly dazzled their eyes?

"The sun? Is it really the sun?" Tom said, almost doubtfully.

"And why not?" Mrs. Hatching demanded. "How else'll beans set, tell me that? Fine thing if sun were to stop shining." Chuckling to herself she set out a Crown Derby tea set, gorgeously colored in red and gold, and a baking of saffron¹⁵ buns. Then she sat down and, drinking her own tea, began to question the two of them about where they had come from, where they were going. The tea was

"The sun?
Is it really
the sun?"

12. clematis-grown: covered with a flowering vine.

13. plaster: a British term for an adhesive bandage.

14. scullery: a small room in which dishwashing and other kitchen chores are done.

15. saffron: made with a cooking spice that imparts an orange-yellow color to foods.

WORDS
TO
KNOW

voluble (vŏl'yə-bəl) *adj.* in or with a long flow of words; talkative

tawny¹⁶ and hot and sweet; the clock's tick was like a bird chirping; every now and then a log settled in the grate; Lily looked sleepily around the little room, so rich and peaceful, and thought, I wish we were staying here. I wish we needn't go back to that horrible pub. . . . She leaned against Tom's comforting arm.

"Look at the sky," she whispered to him. "Out there between the generations. Blue!"

"And ee'll come up and see my spare bedroom, won't ee now?" Mrs. Hatching said, breaking off the thread of her questions—which indeed was not a thread, but merely a savoring¹⁷ of her pleasure and astonishment at this unlooked-for visit—"Bide here, why don't ee? Mid as well. The lil un's fair wore out. Us'll do for ee better 'n rangy old Noakes; proper old scoundrel 'e be. Won't us, William?"

"Ah," William said appreciatively. "I'll sing ee some o' my songs."

A sight of the spare room settled any doubts. The great white bed, huge as a prairie, built up with layer upon solid layer of mattress, blanket, and quilt, almost filled the little shadowy room in which it stood. Brass rails shone in the green dimness. "Isn't it quiet," Lily whispered. Mrs. Hatching, silent for the moment, stood looking at them proudly, her bright eyes slowly moving from face to face. Once her hand fondled, as if it might have been a baby's downy head, the yellow brass knob.



Embrace II (1981), George Tooker. Egg tempera on gesso panel, 18" × 24", private collection.

And so, almost without any words, the matter was decided.

Three days later they remembered that they must go to the village and collect the scooter which must, surely, be mended by now.

They had been helping old William pick a basketful of beans. Tom had taken his shirt off, and the sun gleamed on his brown back; Lily was wearing an old cotton print which Mrs. Hatching, with much chuckling, had shortened to fit her.

It was amazing how deftly, in spite of his blindness, William moved among the beans, feeling through the rough, rustling leaves for the stiffness of concealed pods. He found twice as many as Tom and Lily, but then they, even

16. tawny: tan in color.

17. savoring: full appreciation or enjoyment.

on the third day, were still stopping every other minute to exclaim over the blueness of the sky. At night they sat on the back doorstep while Mrs. Hatching clucked inside as she dished the supper, "Starstruck ee'll be! Come along in, do-ee, before soup's cold; stars niver run away yet as I do know."

"Can we get anything for you in the village?" Lily asked, but Mrs. Hatching shook her head.

"Baker's bread and suchlike's no use but to cripple thee's innardses wi' colic.¹⁸ I been living here these eighty year wi'out troubling doctors, and I'm not faring to begin now." She waved to them and stood watching as they walked into the wood, thin and frail beyond belief, but wiry, indomitable, her black eyes full of zest. Then she turned to scream menacingly at a couple of pullets¹⁹ who had strayed and were scratching among the potatoes.

Almost at once they noticed, as they followed the path, that the sky was clouded over.

B "It is only there on that one spot," Lily said in wonder. "All the time. And they've never even noticed that the sun doesn't shine in other places."

"That's how it must have been all over the world, once," Tom said.

At the garage they found their scooter ready and waiting. They were about to start back when they ran into Mr. Noakes.

1 "Well, well, well, well, *well!*" he shouted, glaring at them with ferocious good humor. "How many wells make a river, eh? And where did you slip off to? Here's me and the missus was just going to tell the police to have the rivers dragged. But hullo, hullo, what's this? Brown, eh? Suntan? Scrumptious," he said, looking meltingly at Lily and giving her another tremendous pinch. "Where'd you get it, eh? That wasn't all got in half an hour, I know. Come on, this means money to you and me; tell

us the big secret. Remember what I said; land around these parts is dirt cheap."

Tom and Lily looked at each other in horror. They thought of the cottage, the bees humming among the runner beans, the sunlight glinting in the red-and-gold teacups. At night, when they had lain in the huge sagging bed, stars had shone through the window, and the whole wood was as quiet as the inside of a shell.

"Oh, we've been miles from here," Tom lied hurriedly. "We ran into a friend, and he took us right away beyond Brinsley." And as Mr. Noakes still looked suspicious and unsatisfied, he did the only thing possible. "We're going back there now," he said. "The sunbathing's grand." And opening the throttle, he let the scooter go. They waved at Mr. Noakes and chugged off toward the gray hills that lay to the north.

"My wedding dress," Lily said sadly. "It's on our bed."

They wondered how long Mrs. Hatching would keep tea hot for them, who would eat all the pasties.²⁰

"Never mind, you won't need it again," Tom comforted her.

At least, he thought, they had left the golden place undisturbed. Mr. Noakes never went into the wood. And they had done what they intended; they had found the sun. Now they, too, would be able to tell their grandchildren, when beginning a story, "Long, long ago, when we were young, in the days when the sky was blue . . ." ♦

18. cripple . . . colic (kŏl'ĭk): give yourself a bad case of indigestion.

19. pullets: young hens.

20. pasties (pās'tēz): a British term for meat pies.

WORDS
TO
KNOW

indomitable (ĭn-dŏm'ĭ-tə-bəl) *adj.* not easily discouraged, defeated, or subdued



Grammar

PROPER ADJECTIVES Remind students that a

sented alternative English histories.